

## Quantifying the Evolution of Comic Books

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### Abstract

A keen look at comic books shows that they are utilizing far less text today than ever before. The amount of words decreases as the graphic art is more able to carry the message to the reader -- as well as having readers who are more readily able to decode the complex visuals being utilized in the comic book. As society becomes increasingly visual through technological advancements and Web 2.0's ability to create and share visuals quickly, the evolution of the comic book as an artistic medium has brought it into a realm of popularity that seems more largely accepted than previously in the past century. This piece explains one comic fans experience with comics in the classroom as a personal narrative surrounding why comics could/should be used as an educational tool, as well as explores questions about declining word based text use as visual based text use increases.

Three DC Universe comic books are analyzed, Wonder Woman, Legion of Super-Heroes, and Batman & Robin, spanning a period of 68 years. The content is deconstructed in terms of average number of pages, panels per page, words per page, and words per panel. The purpose is to see, in quantifiable terms, if contemporary comics have evolved into a medium that relies very little on word based text and presents an art form that challenges readers' visual literacy skills through reliance on graphic art to carry much of the onus of telling its story.

*Keywords:* comics, comic strip, comic books, graphic novels, visual literacy, fanboy art, trade paperbacks, decreasing text use, emerging literacies

**Introduction:**

As a young, overweight, nonathletic child I felt it was the work of fate that I became an avid reader early in my life. Trips to the closest public library, nearly twenty miles away, would end with my carrying an assortment of pieces to the back seat of our family car and diving into them before the keys reached the ignition. As I reflect back to those years, reading was a near sinful pleasure that I held as a special gift. Sadly, not all of my memories are painted with such fond brush strokes. I remember my stepfather often reprimanding me for reading too much, especially those *comics*. His distaste of comics seemed to fit in with much of society at the time (Tabachnick, 2007, Lopes, 2006). He was certain that I was bound to hurt my eyes. Besides, I should probably go outside and get some exercise. His heart was in the right place though and his worries were authentic, even if brusque. However, this meant that my reading was often done in secret; quite literally under cover. I also remember teachers, third and fifth grade more so than others, looking at my reading selections with open disapproval. My fifth grade teacher once told me that I'd probably never amount to anything. Nearly thirty years later and these teachers still lurk into my thoughts and goad me. At some point, rules sprang to life that seemed conveniently (for the teacher) aimed at me: *no reading comic books in class*. While Superman was billed as being faster than a speeding bullet and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, his powers couldn't defeat certain elementary school teachers or well intentioned parents.

Today, a few odd decades later, I still respect the experience comic books offer their readers. It feels as if the comics are some secret lost scrolls that beg to be riddled out. Sadly, my orbit still finds educators who *conveniently* fabricate rules based on their own positioning,

or that of their institution (Dardess, 1995), and definition of appropriateness: *no reading comic books in class*. Nevertheless, there are two key differences between my experiences with comics today and my experiences with them so long ago: 1. There is a differentiation in how I position myself in the battle over comic appropriateness. 2. There is a difference in how the comics themselves ply their trade as a text and graphic based medium (McCloud, 1993).

As a child, I was often pressured to feel ashamed of my taste for the comic style and storyline, retreating to my own fortress of solitude, or bat cave<sup>1</sup> if you prefer, by closing my bedroom door and hunching lowly over my desk or under my covers. Today, however, I reach an almost embarrassing haughtiness with my approach to comics. Instead of feeling debased by colleagues or random passersby who hold no value for the comic genre and scoff at those of us who read it, I remind myself that those who judge the pieces do so out of a two-fold ignorance<sup>2</sup>: 1. They don't have pedagogical knowledge of how the comic texts can be utilized in contemporary classrooms to stimulate readers, concepts, emerging literacies, etc. (Schwarz, 2006, Schwarz, 2002) 2. They don't understand the evolution of the genre into something fitting a Web 2.0 culture that bombards students with complex visual messages daily, justifying – if not creating – the need for exploration of visual literacy in the contemporary classrooms. Much of the scholarship on this comics-in-the-classroom topic deals with utilizing comics as tools to engage student interest or explore visual literacy, detailing the importance of being visually literate in contemporary times, and even explores methods aimed at aiding teachers in effectively integrating comics in their curriculums (Gallo & Weiner, 2004). However, the gap in

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<sup>1</sup> These were the secret hide-outs of Superman and Batman respectively.

<sup>2</sup> I mean this not as judgmental, but instead as unknowing.

much of that literature remains unaddressed. Telling an audience that comics can be used, even should be used, and that they can reach a wider audience while offering more flexibility and engagement, means naught if we don't pause to academically unpack and explore the comic genre's evolution as a communicative medium. In a nutshell, we'll never outdistance the associated stigma of comics if we don't take the time to address the stigma and the related genre based evolution moving away from the stigma.

This paper attempts to explore the evolution, not history, of the comic book through select pieces from the DC Comics universe dating from the 1940's thru 2010. Specifically, the use and relationship of the text (word based) and visuals in early comics will set a framework that seems to be what much of society, as well certain unnamed teachers and "mean-to-do-well" parents who *may* have been spoken of earlier, still view comics as today. However, the contemporary comics' use of text (word based) and visuals will show a paradigm shift in which the visuals themselves have now *become text* and no longer seem to compete with word based text for superiority. Instead, the visuals now seem to carry a heavy burden within the comic, in efforts, perhaps, to allow the text more room for creativity, risk, and specialization.

**Methods:**

I feel it is important to uncover in advance that I could have utilized a number of print artifacts for this examination: 1. The comic strip (from daily newspapers; often shared in minimal 1-3 framings). 2. The comic book (the often monthly ongoing serial story; carries story arcs across multiple issues and perhaps multiple comic book titles). 3. The trade paperback (a collection of comic books that entails a certain story arc bound together; these could contain issues 16-23 of a specific title, for example). 4. The graphic novel (a standalone story outside

the arc of serial comics) (McCloud, 1993). However, I focused specifically on comic books for this examination as they offered the most readily available, recognizable characters<sup>3</sup> to connect with readers. More specifically, I focused only on comic books from the DC Comics universe<sup>4</sup> for this textual comparison, focusing primarily on the Superman character line (Superman, Superboy, Supergirl, etc.), Batman, and Wonder Woman for their wide reaching familiarity.

The specific comic books that were taken into consideration for this piece were Wonder Woman, *The Story of Fir Balsam* (1942); Legion of Super-Heroes, *Star Light, Star Bright...* (1980); and Batman & Robin, *The Circus of Strange* (2010). Each comic was analyzed using the following indicants:

1. The number of pages per comic.
2. The number of panels<sup>5</sup> per comic.
3. The number of words per page.
4. The number of words per panel.

At the pre-planning stages of this project, I had assumptions that comics used fewer words today than they did historically. In turn, it seems they rely more on visuals to communicate complex messages. However, I could not substantiate this. My hope was that this project would turn the “assumption” into “knowledge” if not proof. Thus, my research

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I take certain characters like, but not limited to, Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman to be recognizable globally. Thus, I will not give specific character introductions, backgrounds, and histories in this piece.

<sup>4</sup> DC comics produce characters such as those from footnote 3, as well as Green Lantern, the Flash, and all other members of their famed Justice League of America. It may be interesting to note that DC comics is owned by Time Warner, parent company of Warner Bros. Entertainment, producers of the many superhero movies stemming from the comic characters mentioned previously.

<sup>5</sup> A comic panel is the often square or rectangular box that the visuals and text are drawn within. A page may contain one panel or more.

questions formed themselves into the following: 1. Is the reliance on word based text declining in comics? 2. Is the manner in which the word based text is being used within comics evolving? 3. Are comic visuals more complex today, in terms of what they communicate, then times past?

In efforts to appear transparent in my research, I admit at this juncture that I approached this project with bias. As a life-long comic reader and devoted fanboy I've spent decades immersed in my own research pool. The questions I chose to ask were questions that seemed self-evident in the comics I've read and collected for the majority of my life, but were questions often left unexplored in the literature promoting or debasing comic use. I *believed* the answer to each of my research questions was yes before conducting the research. However, being aware of that - I attempt to share my steps, rationales of choices, examples of visuals, and any findings in a way that will allow readers to approach the data academically, while side-stepping any roadblocks caused by my own interest and experiences in the materials. As for my interests and experiences, I feel that sharing those briefly may help frame the project more thoroughly.

### **Muscles, Capes, Tights, and Fights: One fanboy's interest and experiences**

The thing I remember the most was the way he looked at me. For the first time in any of our classes together, I saw vulnerability in his eyes. He asked me if I read this stuff as he showed me a copy of the *Watchmen* graphic novel that often resided in my classroom cupboards or shelves. I told him I did and that the one he was holding was one of my favorites. I sensed apprehension from him so I started to talk a bit about the piece to show him that I was being authentic. I shared my favorite plot twists, character developments, etc. and he slowly allowed

his apprehension to dissolve. He had struggled through both English classes he had taken with me, due to what he shrugged off as a dislike of reading, but I realized at that moment - as we discussed the story in detail - he liked to read, and read well, if what he read mattered to him. When he shared his thoughts, "*This was, like, the coolest story I've ever read,*" what was important was that they were *his* thoughts about something he really engaged with.

For some reason, this was the scene that came to mind when the principal of the high school where I taught told me that I had to lock my cupboards and stop allowing students to borrow books from my classroom library, at least until the investigation was over. I couldn't grasp his explanation. Apparently some secretary in some administrative office was processing a receipt from months ago, a receipt that linked to a grant I had written for classroom library funding. I had received a number of grants in my time at the high school and had agreements in place with local book stores who would give discounts, match our spending, or award students who stopped into the store coupons for free books. My students could stop into the bookstores or my classroom and add titles to our wish list, and then every so often we'd have a shipment delivered to our classroom. But now, a secretary called a receipt into question so my cupboards were being locked. I couldn't quite follow the story arc through the fog in my head. My classroom library, built over the years with student input, was a source of comfort for me and my students.

I learned long ago that the best way to find out what students *should* be reading is to ask them. We had a system for deciding appropriateness that was *somewhat* flexible. If there was questionable content involved with the book, I'd read it and discuss the content with my students. If a book dealt with suicide, rape, violence, etc. the students would be tasked with



explaining why the reality of those messages mattered, and then find a link in a classical canon text (i.e. suicide in a contemporary novel would link to the suicide in *Romeo & Juliet*), in efforts to share texts that were already approved with the same topicality.

As I locked the cupboards that afternoon, with the Principal explaining it was the Superintendent's call; I was disappointed in our bureaucracy. It seems the secretary recording the paperwork and receipt from my grant was skimming the titles on the list and was shocked by a few words she stumbled upon. She spoke with the Superintendent about the list and shared her disapproval of the titles. The Superintendent phoned the Principal, and commanded the books to be locked up until this matter was fully investigated. Questions were asked: Why would you have such vulgar books on your shelves? Why would you let students read these books? What were you thinking? My answers that attempted to explain, teach, and share were ignored, repeatedly - so I asked a question of my own: Did you read the book(s)? No. The answer was no from the secretary and no from all administrators involved. No. It seems no one complaining had read any of the books they deemed offensive. There were a few books that dealt with teen depression and suicide that had versions of *Loving Yourself* or *Self Love* in the title and a comment was made that masturbation books were not appropriate. *Masturbation?* Even though I explained they were about self-esteem, not self-pleasure, my responses were ignored. As they went through the list, picking at and misconstruing titles, they stumbled on a number of comic books and graphic novels on the list. *What kind of idiot would have high school seniors reading comic strips in class?* It didn't seem the best time to point out the differences in comic strips and graphic novels, so I continued to take note. At some point, as I listened to complaints and accusations, I realized that there was a great divide between what

my students enjoyed reading and looked at as important reading for their lives and what the administrators seemed to think *children* should read. However, the Administration's disfavor seemed repeatedly based on titles and genre only. Without unpacking the drama of the next few weeks, I'll move forward to the end of the incident. I had to justify my choices for a number of books, books that weren't being required - only made available on a classroom shelf or cupboard - and then explain how I shared my classroom library policies with the parents of my students. The sheet I sent home for parents shared contact info, prep hours, a link to the ALA website and this message:

*Please communicate with me if there is a title, topic, author, or genre you would like your student to abstain from reading. You are welcome into my classroom to peruse the classroom library at your convenience. In the event your son or daughter comes home with a book that you do not approve of, simply retrieve the book from them, contact me, and I will make arrangements to collect the book from you.*

I had never had a parent contact me asking for items to be removed or withheld - although I did have a number of parents donate items to our collection.

The *100 Most Commonly Banned and Challenged Books* on the American Library Association's website was a place my students would frequently go for reading suggestions and this is where many of the more risqué pieces in my library came from. However, while my classroom library had 43 of those titles, they were not challenged or banned by the administration. I see a subtle irony that these pieces were overlooked, presumably "safer" because of less controversial titles, while a number of other books were challenged based on their title, style, or genre. So much for the cliché that you can't judge a book by its cover. It

doesn't seem too far stretched to point out that a possible reason that none of ALA commonly challenged books raised an alarm to these administrative versions of Bradbury's *Firemen* is that they weren't looked at closely because the titles and genre seemed safe. In the end, only six novels were removed from my shelves. However, all of the graphic novels in my classroom library were deemed inappropriate. When I asked if any of the administrators involved had read any of the items that were being withheld, my question was deemed irrelevant and left unanswered. Translation: *No*.

You may be asking yourself what books were banned from the shelves: I leave that detail out on purpose. Realize that I knew the collection had material in it that was not intended for *Dora the Explorer* readers. I was teaching reading strategies to juniors and seniors in high school, to both struggling and college prep readers (Meskin, 2007, Schwarz, 2002). Books like the award winning *The Kite Runner*, which shares a scene wherein a 12 year old boy rapes a 10 year old boy, were in the collection because of their complex messages and ability to connect with a high school audience. Of course, *The Kite Runner* was ignored because the title didn't seem blasphemous and it had awards in its pedigree. The books that were pulled weren't as scandalous as many of the books that were allowed. However, the fact that all of the graphic novels (and the few comic books) in the collection were pulled from my shelves and deemed unsuitable, made me wonder why the genre itself wasn't appropriate (in the administration's mind) for the high school classroom. Struggling readers in my classes were connecting with the graphic novels. Strong readers, however, were connecting with the pieces *too*. That day, my students and I lost graphic novels, comic books, etc. in one fell swoop. We lost: *Maus*, *Maus II*, *Beowulf*, *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, *Pride of Baghdad*,

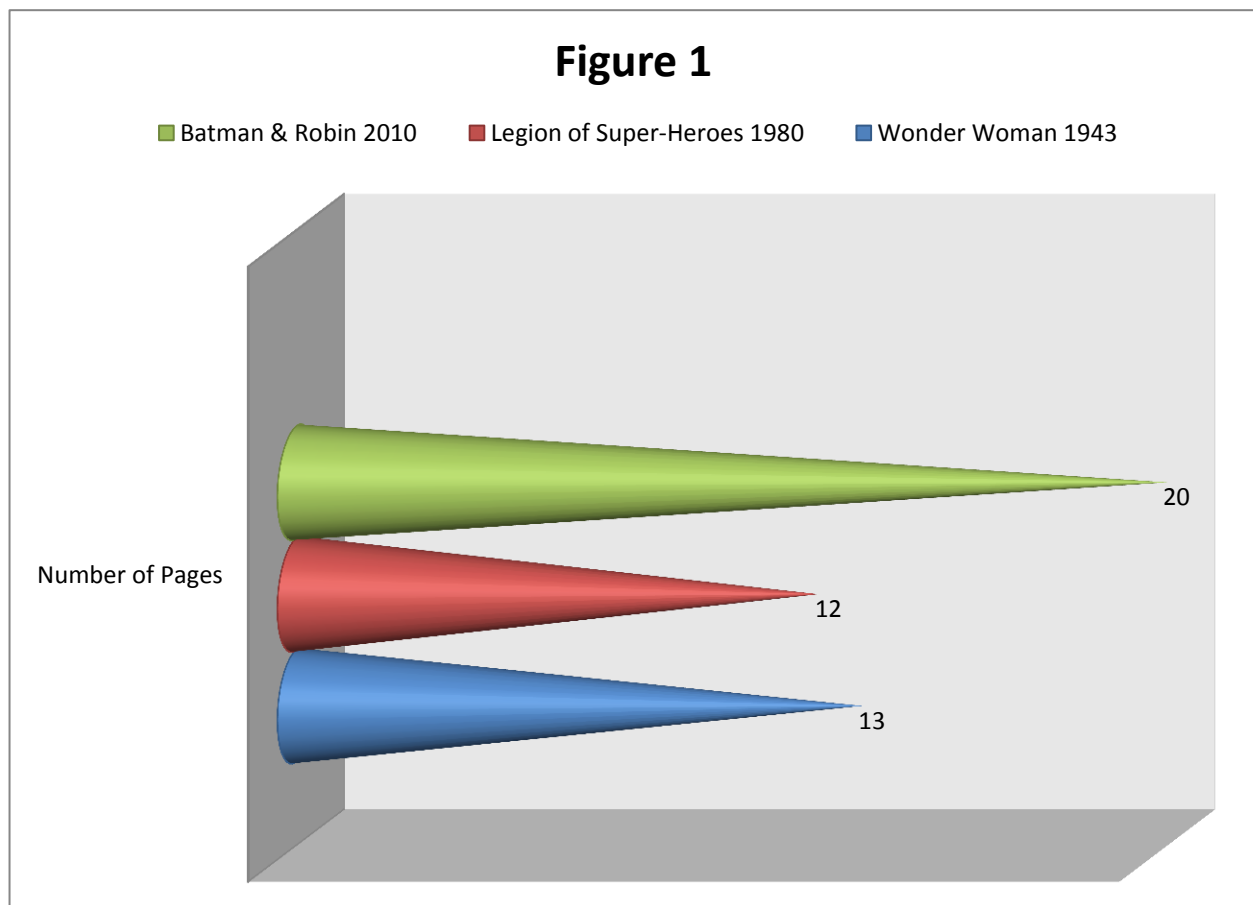
as well as nearly 50 other graphic novels simply because their *genre* was deemed inappropriate. As I remember these events, I feel much the same now as I did then - I'm disappointed that I rolled over, as a not yet tenured teacher, and allowed the items to be removed from the collection. Actually, disappointed may not send the right message ... I'm mad as hell, unequivocally biased (as I've explained earlier), and ashamed of the people involved. I believed then, and still believe now, that the choice to remove an artifact from a classroom, a library, or any place that a child may access it, based on misinformation and personal politics is villainous. It was at the exact time when they removed the pieces from our classroom that we actually needed a hero.

I have wanted to be a teacher much of my life. I have taught at the middle school, high school, and college levels, enjoying (and some days dreading) each for their own reasons. I am an alumni of Saginaw Valley State University (my BA), and Central Michigan University (my MA), and a current doctoral student at Michigan State University. However, before any of those institutions attempted to guide me, I spent what felt like a lifetime inside the classroom - as a student. As that student I remember little of my K-12 years. I was not a *Superman* in the classroom. I was actually a bit of a *Joker*. I saw no use in learning something I saw no purpose in or reading some old dead white guy's take on teen love, dramatic families, and suicide. Instead, I read comics. Mr. X and Mrs. Y would threaten me with bad grades if I didn't read musty black text on yellowing paper to prepare for my test of being standard. Yet those "motivators" couldn't compare with the colors, details, and heroism that I craved. And to be quite blunt, most of that is still true today.

What has changed today is that I realize as a “Highly Qualified” educator, whatever that is supposed to imply, that there is more than one way to achieve our goals in the classroom. Students today are experiencing more visual stimulus, at an earlier age, than ever before. Recently, as I shared a YouTube clip with my students in class, I saw students using their laptops and cell phones to share the clip with others via email, Twitter, or Facebook. *Can you hear me now? Good.* Society no longer moves, shares, and sees at a “dial-up” pace. Related to this advancement is a very gradual shift in streamlining communication. For example, if I felt so inclined, I could work on reducing this piece to the 140 characters available in a tweet. Then, perhaps a more in-depth field report in the 420 characters available for a Facebook status. People could read them while fast-forwarding through commercials on their Tivo. These advancements, if it is right they should be called such, have affected communication in a manner that makes instantaneous, flash-content, focused interaction more common than intimate, complex, slower interactions. Tabachnick (2004) explains, “The graphic novel gives us the subtlety and intimacy we get from good literary books while providing the speed of apprehension and the excitingly scrambled, hybrid reading experience we get from watching, say, computer screens that are full of visuals as well as text” (p.25). The point? Society has gradually moved towards a faster pace in communication and employs technological advances to aid with that pace. This, I propose, could be a reason that mediums are streamlining or redefining their methods of engagement and presentation in layers of evolution. In essence, comics seem “quicker” because there isn’t a slow plod through word based text, but since the graphics themselves need to be considered, or read, it helps give students a new perspective on reading and literacy (Versaci, 2001).

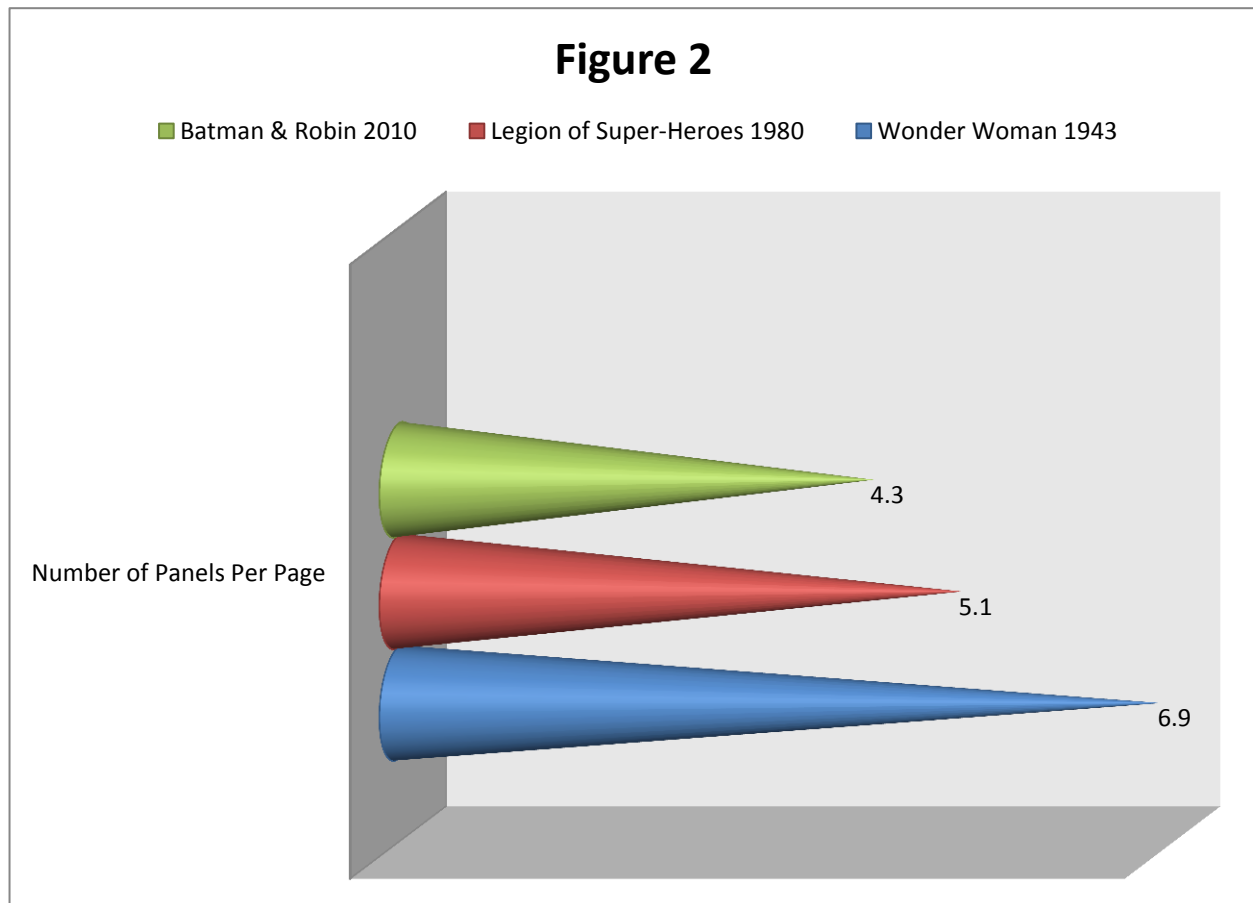
## Data & Analysis

To begin the data collection the first step was to compare the overall size (in pages) of each comic. Why could this be important? If the comics were of different length and it was not reported, readers may make the faulty assumption that the page length had an impact on the data collection and presentation. However, the page lengths, as posted in figure 1, show that the older comics (1980, 1943) were relatively the same size at 12 and 13 pages. The contemporary comic came in roughly 40% longer than both of the other pieces at 20 pages.



Within the pages of each comic, the word based text and graphic art is often placed inside panels on each page. The number of panels per page is organic and can change from one

page to the next. Thus, to consider the standard panel use of the time period, I counted the number of panels in the entire comic book and divided the total number of panels by the number of pages. What was found was that the Wonder Woman (1943) comic utilized the most panels, averaging 6.9 panels per page. By the time the Legion of Super-Heroes (1980) comic was printed, the average panel use dropped to 5.1 panels per page. Likewise, when Batman & Robin (2010) was printed, there was another decrease in the average panels per page. See Figure 2.



To best communicate the data from figure two in comic terms, Spread 1 shares a left hand page from each comic. While the specific number of panels on the pages shown in Spread 1 may not be the exact number of the average, the pages show how the titles utilized the panels in to different extents. In Spread 1 the Wonder Woman (1943) page has the first position and shares 7 panels, relatively close to the 6.9 average panels used in that comic. The middle position belongs to the Legion of Super-Heroes (1980) and shares 5 panels, again, close to the 5.1 average per page. Finally, the final position belongs to Batman & Robin (2010) and shows 4 panels, coming in just under its 4.3 panel average.

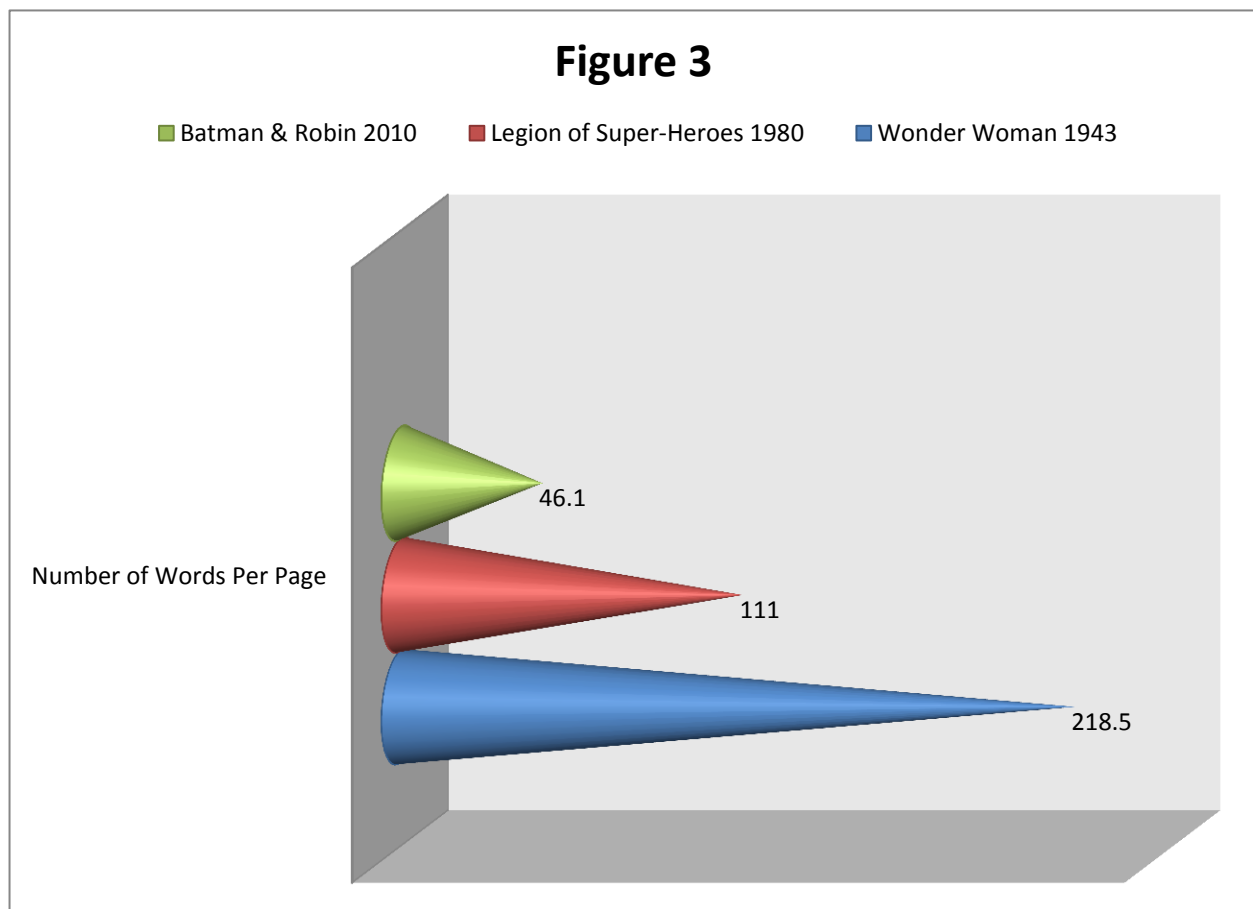
### Spread 1: Wonder Woman (1943); Legion of Super-Heroes (1980); Batman & Robin (2010)



After crafting a foundation by collecting the number of pages and then moving one level deeper into the material by addressing the number of panels per page, it seemed logical to move another level deeper into the material by addressing the number of words per page. In

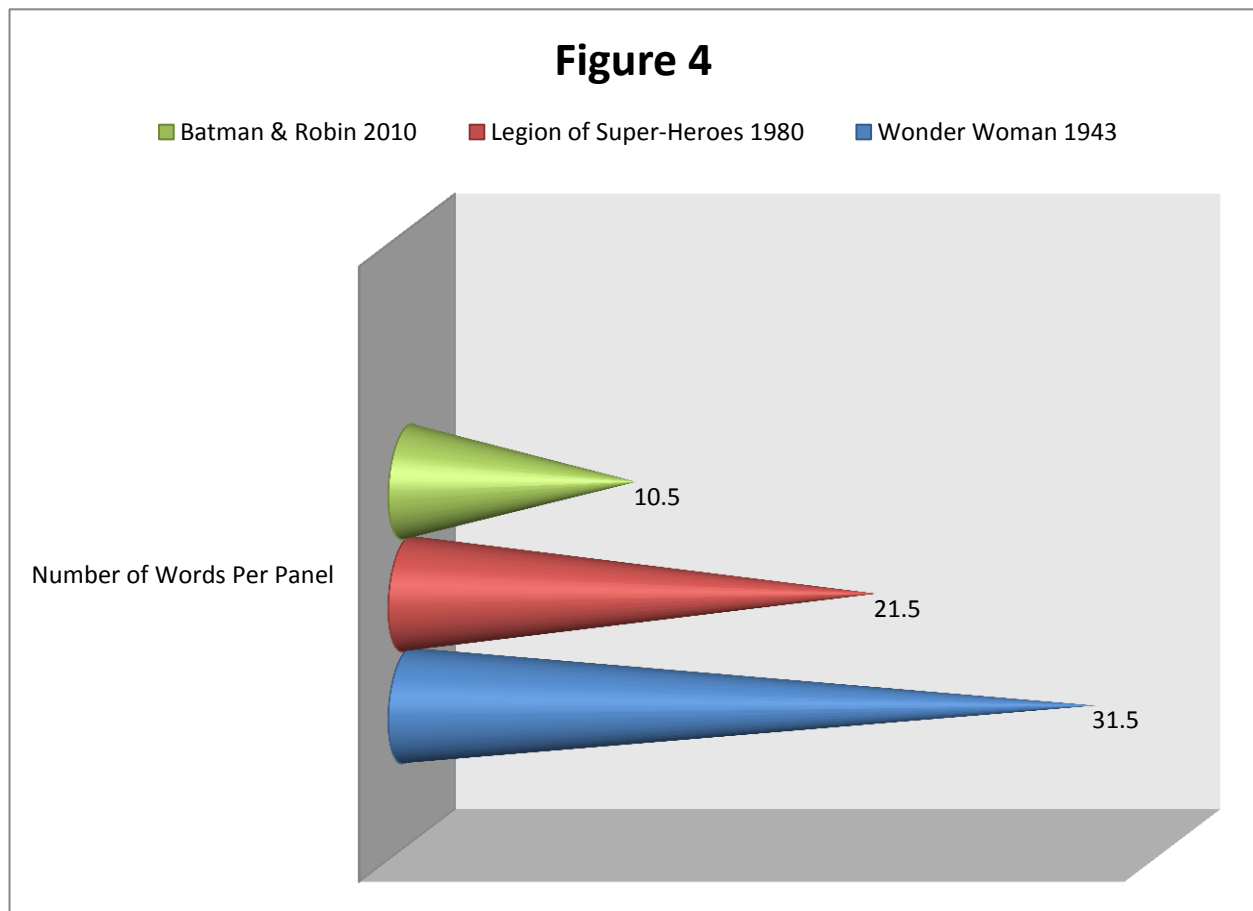


some perspectives, this level (words per page) could be seen as one of the pillars in the hypothesis that comics are evolving to a visual based text medium from a word based text medium. The data presented in Figure 3 shows a snapshot of that evolution. The Wonder Woman comic (1943) set the standard for this measurement with 2,840 word based text utilizations. This equates to 218.5 words per page. Moving forward to the Legion of Super-Heroes (1980) piece, the word based text utilizations dropped to 1,332 utilizations. This is 111 words per page. Although, it may be worth remembering that this comic actually was one page longer than the Wonder Woman comic, even though it had 46.9% less word based text utilizations.



Maneuvering the last jump forward to the Batman & Robin (2010) piece, the word based text utilizations dropped to a total of 922. While 40% longer than the other comics, the Batman & Robin (2010) comic used 68% less text than the 1943 comic and 31% less text than the 1980 comic.

Moving a final level deeper into the material by addressing the number of words per panel may seem simplistic and obvious. It is not meant to. Because of the page of a comic being (often) broken into panels, comic readers are well versed in moving through comics using a panel-by-panel progression.



Thus, a comic reader may not notice a decrease in word based text from page-to-page, but may find it more plausible to recognize the data in a panel-by-panel format. Hence, Figure 4 offers the average words per panel in each comic. It may be anti-climactic to say that Wonder Woman (1943) used the most words per panel, averaging 31.5. The Legion of Super-Heroes (1980) lowered the average words per panel by 33% by dropping their usage to 21.5. Finally, Batman & Robin (2010) came in using only 33% of the words per panel that Wonder Woman did and 50% of the words per panel that The Legion of Super-Heroes (1980) used at 10.5.

## Conclusions

As a comic reader the majority of my life, I've been immersed in the gradual change the data here suggests. I have slowly recognized word based text fading away in quantity, but improving ten-fold in quality. When comic artists use some selection of words now, they seem to allow the word to fulfill a duty, but a duty that adds to the intimacy of the visuals they are associated with.

At the beginning of this project I shared three research questions I hoped to explore: 1. Is the reliance on word based text declining in comics? 2. Is the manner in which the word based text is being used within comics evolving? 3. Are comic visuals more complex today, in terms of what they communicate, then times past? I believe that the answer at this time points to yes for each inquiry. As the data shares, the decline in word based text, combined with an increase in the visuals' newly revised (in comparison to 1980's revision) responsibility to tell the story, creates a perfect storm in which comics could gain a foothold in status and respectability.

I would encourage future research to address a number of factors I left unrealized in this piece. Had time not been marching steadily onward, I feel more comics from each era, as well as possible comics from each decade, could add further data to this rough framing and potentially show more aspects of material in the data set. It's inevitably that comics from each area would fall outside this trend. The question to be asked then is about the most commonly used conventions and styles (word versus visual) for each era. It's only common sense to expect outliers. While I believe that the overwhelming majority of comics between the 1940's and 2010's will continue to prove and shed further light on the trend towards visual text utilizations, I willingly accept any data that can possibly disprove or shed a new perspective on this trend.

## Appendices 1

Wonder Woman (1943) Data				
Pages	Panels	Words	Captions	Balloons
1	2	149	1	1
2	8	286	5	11
3	8	272	7	11
4	8	262	3	18
5	8	234	3	11
6	7	199	3	11
7	6	163	6	6
8	7	207	4	11
9	7	236	3	11
10	7	227	3	14
11	7	174	2	13
12	7	181	4	5
13	8	251	7	10

## Appendices 2

Legion of Super-Heroes (1980) Data				
Pages	Panels	Words	Captions	Balloons
1	1	64	1	2
2	6	124	0	13
3	4	123	0	12
4	5	141	0	11
5	6	143	3	13
6	6	128	0	15
7	7	104	1	13
8	6	115	1	14
9	5	108	1	10
10	6	107	1	13
11	6	147	3	7
12	5	93	0	12

## Appendices 3

Batman & Robin (2010) Data				
Pages	Panels	Words	Captions	Balloons
1	1	7	0	1
2	3	4	0	1
3	4	74	0	6
4	5	20	0	6
5	4	26	0	5
6	9	6	0	4
7	6	10	0	2
8	6	4	0	2
9	4	29	0	4
10	4	14	0	6
11	4	14	0	6
12	6	69	0	13
13	3	43	0	5
14	4	59	0	8
15	5	117	0	8
16	5	165	0	9
17	5	145	0	7
18	5	94	0	6
19	4	6	0	4
20	5	36	0	4

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